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FM AMEMBASSY KINGSTON
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RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 0558
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RHMFISS/HQ USSOUTHCOM J7 MIAMI FL PRIORITY
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L KINGSTON 000221

SIPDIS

DEPT PASS TO CENTRAL AMERICAN CARIBBEAN BASIN COLLECTIVE

DEPT FOR WHA/CAR (ACADIEUX, WSMITH, VDEPIRRO) INR/IAA (GBOHIGIAN)
TREASURY FOR IA/WH (ERIN NEPHEW)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/20/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [ASEC](#) [SNAR](#) [KCOR](#) [CARICOM](#) [IBRD](#)

IDB, CDB, JM, XL

SUBJECT: JAMAICA: PRIME MINISTER BRUCE GOLDING'S RULING
LABOUR PARTY (JLP) CANDIDATE LIKELY TO WIN WEST PORTLAND
BY-ELECTION; IF NOT, SERIOUS IMPLICATIONS

REF: A. KINGSTON 156 (272047Z FEB 09)
[1](#)B. 08 KINGSTON 1034 (091429Z DEC 08)
[1](#)C. 08 KINGSTON 494 (301353Z MAY 08)
[1](#)D. 08 KINGSTON 409 (091742Z MAY 08)
[1](#)E. 08 KINGSTON 398 (071203Z MAY 08)
[1](#)F. 08 KINGSTON 364 (291558Z APR 08)
[1](#)G. 08 KINGSTON 310 (141908Z APR 08)
[1](#)H. 07 KINGSTON 1336 (042044Z SEP 07)
[1](#)I. 08 KINGSTON 837 (222015Z SEP 08)

Classified By: CDA JAMES T. HEG, Reasons 1.5 (B) AND (D)

Summary

1.(C)Prime Minister (PM) Bruce Golding's ruling Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) appears likely to win a key by-election in the West Portland district on March 23, thus retaining its narrow 31-28 majority in Parliament. If it were to lose, Golding would come under immense pressure. While national elections are not constitutionally required until September, 2012, and he would prefer not to risk a snap national election until economic recovery is at last in sight, whether the JLP could then cling to power without losing any further seats in three other anticipated by-elections appears doubtful. End Summary.

A Key Precedental Ruling

2.(C) Per reftel (A), in keeping with an Appellate Court ruling of February 27, a by-election to be held March 23 in the district of West Portland finally will determine the Member of Parliament (MP) to represent the constituency. Until recently, the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP)'s Daryl Vaz, who captured the seat by a 7.3 percent margin in the September, 2007 national election (reftel H), but subsequently was disqualified as an MP because of having held allegiance to a foreign power at the time of his nomination (reftels A-G), was universally favored to once again trounce the People's National Party (PNP) candidate Abe Dabdoub. Indeed, an internal poll conducted for the PNP showed Vaz leading by an unprecedented 29 points. Sensing an inevitable defeat, on March 1 the PNP's charismatic populist President and Leader of the Opposition Portia Simpson Miller (PSM) announced that, instead of Dabdoub, Kenneth D. Rowe would contest the seat for the

PNP. Rowe's selection, and strong support from party leaders on the campaign trail over the last three weeks, have given the PNP an outside chance to recapture West Portland. For a number of historical reasons, this is ironic.

Background: West Portland

3.(SBU) West Portland was among the 32 constituencies established in the Constitution granted to Jamaica by the UK in 1944. Of the 37 candidates who contested the 14 general elections between 1944 and 2007, only five have done so successfully -- three JLP (including Vaz), and two PNP; the JLP has won nine times, to the PNP's five times. Ironically, in 2002 Kenneth Rowe nearly captured the seat running as a JLP candidate, losing to the PNP's Errol Ennis by only 281 votes. For the 2007 national election (reftel H), the JLP leadership decided to replace Rowe with Vaz as the party's candidate; Rowe then switched allegiance to the PNP. He now squares off against the man who replaced him as the JLP candidate in 2007. West Portland has seen lengthy periods of domination by both parties: the JLP 1944-1989, and the PNP 1989-2007. Perhaps ominously for Rowe, historically the electorate has not given favorable treatment to PNP candidates having previously switched allegiance from the JLP: in 1955, 1972, and 2007 PNP candidates lost in part because they were perceived as "turncoats." Vaz publicly has denounced Rowe as a "redundant Labourite."

Vaz Still Has the Inside Track

4.(C) In the course of a recent private meeting with Chargin, senior PNP MP and former Minister of National Security Dr. Peter Phillips, who unsuccessfully challenged PSM for the party presidency last year (reftel I), opined that Vaz very likely would recapture the West Portland seat, a prediction repeated by other PNP grass-roots activists in private discussions with PolOff. Phillips said that, given Vaz's popularity and the JLP government's recent road and construction projects in the constituency, the PNP's only real advantage was pervasive public frustration with the country's high unemployment, inflation, negative growth, and rampant gang-related crime; at least in West Portland, such frustrations probably would not overcome Vaz's popularity. Although Phillips was wrong in predicting his own victory during his unsuccessful PNP leadership challenge last fall (reftel I), his analysis of the West Portland contest was supported by comments by key Jamaican private sector leaders at a March 18 lunch hosted by CDA (septel).

Three Conceivable Outcomes: the Implications

5.(C) In post's estimation, the West Portland by-election now appears to have three conceivable outcomes. In order of likelihood, they are:

(A) Vaz by a close margin: In post's estimate, Vaz is likely to win by roughly five percentage points. He would regain the West Portland seat, thus preserving the narrow 32-28 parliamentary majority enjoyed by PM Golding's JLP government. However, a close margin of victory would raise doubts about the JLP's retention of seats in three other districts in which similar by-elections are anticipated in coming months: North East St. Ann (Shahine Robinson); North East St. Catherine (Gregory Mair); and North West Clarendon (Michael Stern) (reftel A).

(B) Vaz by a landslide: Vaz enjoys strong popular support, and has maintained publicly that he will be disappointed if he does not win by a wide margin. This outcome would put the JLP in a stronger position in the run-up to the other

anticipated by-elections: barring unforeseen developments, Robinson would almost certainly win, and Mair and Stern would be strengthened.

(C) Rowe in an upset: If Rowe were to pull off an upset victory, it would cut the JLP government's parliamentary majority to a razor-thin 31-29 and shake the party to its very foundations. PM Golding would come under immense pressure. While national elections are not constitutionally required until September, 2012, and Golding would prefer not to risk a snap national election until economic recovery is at last in sight, whether the JLP could cling to power without losing any other seats is highly doubtful.
HEG